SLAMDUNK:
SELLING FRAME RELAY INTO THE SNA ENVIRONMENT

Survey finds SNA users planning for big move

Baton Passes to Frame Relay

After years of experimenting with frame relay, a growing number of companies are ready to move critical mainframe business applications from private-line networks to the efficient packet-switched, public network service. For big companies, that means running IBM Systems Network Architecture traffic over frame relay.

The trend seems clear. A recent IBM survey of SNA users found that 67% plan to implement frame relay within the next two years. "The intensity of interest in moving legacy systems onto frame relay is really hot," says Steve Hindman, a product manager for AT&T's Interspan high-speed services, which includes frame relay.

Long the standard networking technology for IBM users, SNA has a strong presence in corporate America, and some 80% of the SNA customers surveyed by IBM say they are still expanding their SNA networks.

Frame relay networks offer users big savings over full-time leased-line networks-sometimes as much as 30%—because customers only pay for frame relay services when they use them. But more important, customers can use frame relay to integrate several types of traffic-including SNA, X.25 packet switching, and private-line networks-onto a single network, reducing the time and effort it takes to manage several networks. Notes Raymond Kang, MCI director of broadband marketing, "Frame relay is becoming the core integration service for customer data networks."

Illinois, for example, started moving its statewide SNA network to frame relay two years ago. "It enabled us to move multiple protocols across a single physical network," says Ron Sanderson, distributed services manager for data centers for the State of Illinois. But users moving SNA traffic onto frame relay must be careful, he warns. SNA was meant to work on networks that are designed differently than today's frame relay networks. As a result, SNA sessions are particularly sensitive to transmission delays.

That can make management difficult. "Network management [for frame relay] is not quite at the level that those who run SNA networks are used to," says Sanderson. "When you have dirty links, you know it fast."

In fact, frame relay connections are so congestion-sensitive that Sanderson now asks for daily reports on his 90 frame relay links, even though they represent only about 10% of his 1,000-node network.

One way to avoid trouble is to prioritize delay-sensitive SNA traffic ahead of traffic that uses the Internet Protocol (IP), says John Boyd, network manager at Northeast Utilities, which has one of the nation's largest private frame relay networks. He prioritizes the short packets-which include SNA and other time-sensitive interactive traffic-ahead of the larger IP packets. "Somebody who's moving a lot of stuff [larger packets] around isn't expecting a response right away, anyway," he says.

Part of the push to frame relay is coming from IBM. The company has been supporting frame relay for SNA backbone networks for the past few years, offering interfaces between the network control points and other switching nodes. Recently, IBM put even more muscle behind frame relay by adding support for network access products.